

NEWSLETTER 1999/1

Regional exhibitions dealing with Jewish themes – Mikulov

Newsletter 3/98 included a feature on the synagogue in Rychnov nad Kněžnou and the exhibition which has been installed here in co-operation with the Jewish Museum in Prague. We shall now focus on the regional exhibition in the town of Mikulov.



Mikulov is a protected cultural site in South Moravia, about 210km to the south-east of Prague. The first record of a Jewish settlement here dates back to the second half of the 14th century. The Jewish community in Mikulov emerged in the 15th century and was

second only to Prague in terms of size until the mid-19th century. In 1848 there were 3,670 Jews living here.

From the 16th to the second half of the 19th century, Mikulov was the centre of the Moravian provincial rabbis. Among the prominent personages who officiated here are, for example, Rabbi Loew and David Abraham Oppenheim, both of whom are buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, and Lipman ben Natan ha-Levi Heller, known as Yom Tov, who later became the provincial rabbi of Bohemia.



The partial emancipation of Jews living in the Czech Lands in 1848 led, among other things, to the migration of the Jewish population. Jews started to leave Mikulov for other towns, which resulted in the decline of the Jewish community here. In 1937 there were only 437 Jews living in this town. The community was revived after the Second World War, but only for a short time.

Despite the persecution of Jews in the Second World War, a great number of Jewish sites in Mikulov remained intact – including part of the Jewish quarter, the Old (Upper) Synagogue and the large Jewish cemetery.

In 1936, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Jewish Museum for Moravia and Silesia was opened in Mikulov. In view of the unsettled

political situation, the museum was transferred in May 1938 to Brno, later becoming part of the Central Jewish Museum in Prague. One of the directors of the pre-war museum, Prof. Alfred Engel (1881-1944), was involved in the project to set up a war-time Central Jewish museum in Prague.

The Upper Synagogue (see photograph) was built about 1550. After being seriously damaged by fire in 1719 it had to undergo conversion. It was reopened in 1723, from which period originates the present Baroque appearance of the synagogue. Divine services were held here until 1938, when it was closed.

During the Nazi occupation and immediately after the war it was used as a storehouse and in 1960 it was taken over by the State, which oversaw its restoration in 1977-88. The Upper Synagogue is now a listed building.

At present, the synagogue is the venue for concerts and exhibitions held by the Regional Museum in Mikulov. An exhibition devoted to the history of the local Jewish community opened here in 1995, to which the Jewish Museum in Prague loaned a number of items from its collection – synagogal textiles (Torah binders, mantles, curtains and valances), metal artefacts (e.g., a silver pointer, Hanukkah lamps, a Torah shield and crown) and an Esther scroll dating from the turn of the 18th century. All of these items derive from South Moravia.

The Cultural and Educational Centre (CEC) in 1999

The CEC has again prepared a number of attractive programmes for its visitors. In addition to two final lectures from the series Jewish Authors in European Literature, these involve regular meetings with the Chief Rabbi of the Czech Republic, Karol Sidon. In his series, The Jewish Year, the Rabbi explains and puts into a broader context certain aspects of Jewish holidays. For example, Shavuoth is marked by an interpretation of “The Torah – A Guide through Life”, the 17 Tamuz Fast is linked to the lecture “Exile and Redemption”, Sukkoth is covered by the topic “Israel and Nation”, while Hanukkah is dealt with by the topic “Emancipation and Assimilation”. Also to continue is the series Jewish Painters and Sculptors in Czech Art, in which Czech specialists acquaint the general public with such artists as Robert Guttman, František Zelenka and Robert Piesen. The series Rabbinic Personages covers the life and work of such prominent rabbis as Israel-Baal Shem Tov, Dov Ber Mezirich, Loew and David Oppenheim.

The CEC programme offer for 1999 includes four new series. The Jewish Community in Slovakia in the 20th Century is the title of a series of lectures by Peter Salner from the Jewish community of Bratislava, acquainting the Czech public with the development and status of Slovak Jews. A series of Czech and foreign films dealing with Jewish themes has been prepared in co-operation with the Czech National Film Archive. The series Jewish Music with interpretation, which features Czech group and solo concerts, is bound to provoke great interest – some of the concerts are to be held in the recently opened Spanish Synagogue. September will see the launch of a series of lectures on the theme Jewish Figures in Czech Science, Technology and Industry.

As we have previously pointed out, the CEC is actively involved in the field of school education. In its attempt to make Jewish themes more accessible, it is systematically focusing on teacher training projects, especially in co-operation with history teachers. As part of the Be-shalom project, which is being financially supported by the Open Society Fund, the CEC and various faculties of education are creating a new study module for teaching tolerance. The CEC will again

provide regular one-day seminars for regional educational centres and faculties of education, at which CEC lecturers will talk about Jewish history and culture. As part of the teacher training programme, there will be a spring seminar on the theme The History of the State of Israel, held in collaboration with the Institute of World History at the Charles University Philosophy Faculty. One of the projects which the CEC has prepared for University students and school pupils is Lost Neighbours, which focuses on an awareness of the history of Jewish settlement in various regions of the country, from the period before Second World War up until the present. The Jewish Year is a project aimed at elementary school pupils, acquaints them in an engaging and informal way with Jewish holidays, customs and traditions. Also included in the school programmes is the Anti-Bias Curriculum project, which deals with teaching tolerance at kindergartens. The CEC enjoys the support of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, which is mainly involved in providing financial and organisational

assistance for the renewal of Jewish education in post-Communist countries.

One of the last concrete projects initiated by the CEC, which also received financial support from the Foundation, is the theatre show *Jonah and the Others*. This is a production aimed at pre-school children and based on three loosely related Biblical stories about Abraham, Jonah and Queen Esther. By following the fate of these Biblical characters, children are brought in touch with distant Jewish



history and are introduced in an engaging way to Jewish traditions and universal principles of faith, love and humility. The play, which was premiered in January 1999 in the Theatre Minor, was written and directed by Vida Neuwirthová, a member of both the Theatre Minor and the Jewish Community of Prague.

New exhibition of paintings

by Viktor Munk At the end of March 1999, in the prayer hall of the Spanish Synagogue (a 1930s annex), the Jewish Museum in Prague opened a temporary exhibition of paintings by the Czech naive artist Viktor Munk (1928 - 1997). In his youth Munk shared the fate of the majority of Czech Jews, being imprisoned in Terezín and then sent to Auschwitz. After the hardships of the war he returned to Czechoslovakia, where he settled in Central Bohemia. The paintings displayed in the prayer hall are mostly from the 1960s and 1970s. The exhibition is curated by Dr. Arno Pařík and runs until May 1999.



On Itamar Levin's text about the Jewish Museum in Prague

At the end of 1998 the Jewish Agency for Israel, in co-operation with the World Jewish Restitution Organization, published a second revised and update edition of Itamar Levin's *The Last Chapter of the Holocaust?*. This publication deals with the fate of Jewish property since the end of Second World War in Central and Eastern European countries. Among other things, the author considers the state in which Jewish artefacts and sites are in and the care they receive. In this connection, I. Levin makes a number of subjective and prejudicial allegations



against the Jewish Museum in Prague which are based on incorrect and even fictitious information. An illustration of the way I. Levin deviates from the facts is his claim that in the cellar of a church 50km from Prague are stored some 3,000 curtains of the Ark, "exposed to damp and gnawing mice". In actual fact, the synagogue textiles, including curtains, are stored in a synagogue approximately 80km from Prague, which

has undergone complete reconstruction. The security, air-conditioning and technical conditions of this alleged "church" are of an extremely high standard, widely praised in September 1998 by a group of specialists in the field of museology.

In view of the seriousness of the misinformation contained in I. Levin's publication, the Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Leo Pavlát, prepared a detailed commentary which clearly refutes all the allegations and mistakes made by I. Levin. This commentary is complemented by the Museum's report for 1997, photographic documentation of Museum work and letters of praise from prominent Museum visitors. It can be found under the title Report on Itamar Levin's "The Last Chapter of the Holocaust?" on the Jewish Museum's web-site at <http://www.jewishmuseum.cz>.

Travelling exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Australia

The exhibition *Precious Legacy: Treasures from the Jewish Museum in Prague* was held in the Sydney Powerhouse Museum from December 1998 – February 1999, attracting great interest from the Australian public. This large travelling exhibition, drawn from the collections of the Jewish Museum, was the first of its kind in Australia. It included over 300 exhibits – rare prints and manuscripts (the earliest of which dating from the 16th century), pictures, glass, porcelain, silver artefacts, synagogue textiles (curtains, mantles, valances) and children's drawings. As to the subject-matter of the exhibition, this was devised in very

broad terms – as can be seen from the various thematic sections: Jewish holidays, family life, Jewish education, the burial society, the work of Jewish artists and of children imprisoned in the Terezín Ghetto. The exhibition was complemented by a section devoted to the life of the Jewish community in Australia, expressing the continuity of ethnic Jewish life. The curator of the exhibition was Jana Vytrhlíková from the Powerhouse Museum, who also prepared an attractive catalogue.



Visits to the Jewish Museum

January - The historic sites of the former Jewish Town were viewed with interest by the Swedish Culture Minister Marita Ulvskog, who was accompanied by representatives of the Jewish community of Stockholm.

March - The director of the Jewish museum welcomed a delegation of the Northamerican Board of Rabbis headed by rabbi Jay Y. Rosenbaum.

Jewish Museum material

Due to the great interest shown by visitors in the recently opened Spanish Synagogue, we have prepared a set of postcards depicting its interior.

For more information on how to buy the postcards write to:

Židovské muzeum v Praze,
Jáchymova 3,
110 00 Praha 1,
fax: 004202 2310681

